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Issue 14

Natural Areas Newsletter

April 1991

Naturally Yours

The Natural Areas Program is sponsored by Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife

Wagner Orchids Spared!

Bog adder's mouth orchid by John Maywood

The Wagner Natural Area Society and their supporters are breathing a little easier now that a proposed interchange and connector road will not be built in the original location. The road developments will now be located far enough east to avoid the significant natural features of the area that the original proposal would have impacted, including populations of the rare bog adder's mouth orchid (*Malaxis paludosa*), numerous springs and Morgan Creek (formerly called Wagner Creek).

Alberta Transportation and Utilities is to be congratulated for this very positive outcome. The Honourable Al (Boomer) Adair, made the announcement on January 21, 1991, that his department had accepted the recommendations of the environmental impact assessment report that was completed for the proposed development. This comprehensive study assessed potential impacts on vegetation, hydrology and wildlife and included an extensive public participation program.

As well as moving the road and interchange, it was agreed that all lands south of Highway 16X and west of the connecting road not required by Transportation and Utilities would be transferred to Forestry, Lands and Widlife for incorporation into the Wagner Natural Area.

This decision will help to ensure the long-term survival and ecological integrity of the Wagner Natural Area and its natural features. Everyone who played a part in the negotiations, including conservation organizations, the public, scientists, teachers, students, government agencies and polticians are to be congratulated. The process that was developed to assess the potential impacts and actively involve the public at all stages provides an excellent model that can be applied in similiar situations.❑

Can you help....?

This summer will mark the fifth year of data collection as part of the Federation of Alberta Naturalists' Alberta Bird Atlas Project.

Project staff encourage you to submit copies of your records of Alberta bird sightings and observations of breeding behaviour, dating from 1987. Your records should include information on species, number of birds seen, and date and description of any breeding evidence. This evidence may include observations of:

- •species in suitable breeding habitat;
- •male/female pairs in suitable habitat;
- •territorial behaviour;
- •courtship behaviour;
- •nest building;
- •distraction displays;
- •birds carrying food; and
- •birds visiting probable nest sites.

And discovery of:

- •used nests;
- •fledglings;
- •occupied nests;
- •nests with eggs; and
- •nests with young.

Are your field notes legible? If so, and your location information is sufficiently precise so that it can be assigned to within a 10 km x 10 km area (the unit size for the project), atlas staff will transcribe your notes.

Contributors will be acknowledged in the completed Alberta Bird Atlas.

If you are interested in other opportunities to participate, contact:

Alberta Bird Atlas Project
c/o Provincial Museum of Alberta
12845 - 102 Avenue
Edmonton, Alberta T5N 0M6
(403) 453-9163❑

Milk River Plan Progressing

The 6500 ha (25 sq. mi.) Milk River Natural Area is part of one of the most undisturbed and scenic mixed grassland ecosystems in Canada.

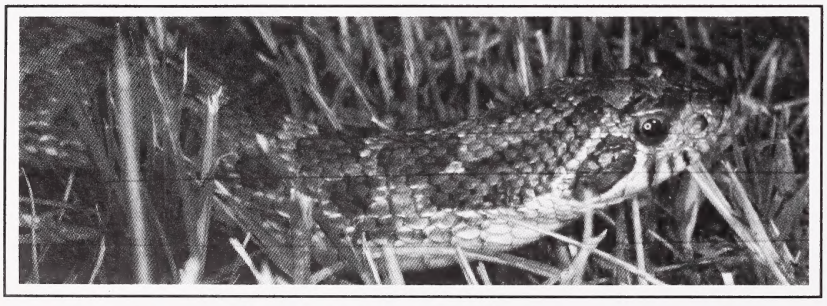
A management plan for the Milk River Natural Area and Kennedy Coulee Ecological Reserve was prepared and publicly presented by the Milk River Management Committee on February 5, 1991, in Foremost. Committee members held round-table discussions in the afternoon with landowners and individuals having a special interest in the area. During the evening, about 30 people attended a public meeting.

Both meetings were productive and several recommendations will be added to the management plan. The agencies represented on the committee will review the revised plan before it is submitted to the Ministers of Forestry, Lands and Wildlife and Recreation and Parks for approval and departmental implementation. These further reviews and approvals should only take a few more months to complete. This management plan will be the culmination of a decade-long planning, negotiation and education process for the Milk River area. When completed, it will guide the management of this sensitive and important area for many decades into the future.

The Milk River Management Committee works toward the resolution of a variety of issues based on the conservation objectives for Milk River. Its membership speaks from a broad base of interests, including the Alberta Wilderness Association, County of Forty Mile, Foremost Fish and Game Association, Lethbridge Community College, Southern Alberta Environmental Group, local ranchers and Alan Hyland, the MLA for Cypress-Redcliff. Staff from Natural Areas and Public Lands--Southern Region participate on the committee along with other resource managers from Forestry, Lands and Wildlife and Recreation and Parks.

Once the plan is finalized, copies will be available from the Natural and Protected Areas office or from Public Lands Division--Southern Region, Bag 3014, 2nd flr., Sun Centre, 530-8 St. South, Lethbridge, Alberta T1J 2J8.❑

Alberta's only native lizard is the short-horned lizard, also called the "horned-toad" is found along the Milk River coulee rim. In this hot, dry environment, the short-horned lizard basks in the morning sun and burrows into the sand to sleep at night.❑



Have you seen this snake?

We need your help in locating western hognose snakes in Alberta. They are an important component of the prairie ecosystem and may well be endangered.

The acting ability of this snake is its most distinguishing feature. A hognose snake will flatten its neck, hiss loudly and occasionally strike (usually with its mouth closed). It is all a bluff, though, because this snake is not venomous and rarely attempts to bite even when handled. If the intruder is not frightened away by this aggressive display, the hognose snake changes tactics and performs an elaborate death scene that begins with violent writhing and ends with the snake lying limp, belly-up with mouth open and tongue lolling out.

Distinguishing features:

- 30 to 90 cm long;
- stout body;
- broad neck;
- tan-coloured body, marked with dark blotches on back and paler blotches on the sides;
- pale underside with distinct black blotches; and
- a sharply upturned snout (the best field identification mark).

Areas with sandy soils in southern Alberta are most likely to attract the hognose snake because of its burrowing habits. Do not injure this species or remove it from its habitat! Call the nearest Fish and Wildlife office or contact: Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, 7th floor, 6909 - 116 Street, Edmonton, Alberta T6H 4P2 Telephone: (403) 422-9535. The most valuable information you can provide is:

- date and time of observation
- description of weather and habitat
- description of your sighting
- location (as specific as possible, including section, township, range, distance to nearest town or highway, etc.)❑

Operation Burrowing Owl

by Shannon Lord

Editor's note: We thank Shannon Lord for providing this article about one of the many valuable volunteer conservation projects in Alberta.

Owls in the underground? Well yes, in a sense. What may at first seem like a strange residence for an owl, old badger holes are quite a reasonable alternative when you consider what options are available for nest sites over miles of treeless prairie.

Where to look

If you find yourself driving along country roads through the prairies this summer, you may have the delight of watching a burrowing owl scold you from its burrow or favorite perching post. Once you spot one, you cannot mistake it for any other bird. The best clue is if you see it scurry down an old badger hole -- no other bird in Alberta will do that.

Burrowing owls are truly an endearing bird to see. They only stand approximately 20 cm high, and alot of that height comes from their surprisingly long legs. They can often be seen bobbing up and down on these long legs, surveying the landscape. Of course, because they are a member of the owl family, these creatures can turn their heads 180 degrees to get a full look at you.

Like so much of the prairie's unique and special wildlife, burrowing owls have been placed on the threatened species list established by the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC). Fortunately for the owls, more than 150 people across southern Alberta have joined Operation Burrowing Owl, a voluntary habitat protection stewardship program.

A simple program

The program is quite simple in its delivery, and has certainly been successful in gaining support. Farmers who have burrowing owls on their land are asked to report sightings of these special birds on their land. An Operation Burrowing Owl representative then drives out for a visit and asks the farmer to sign a voluntary habitat protection agreement. The agreement asks the farmer not to break the land around the burrow for a period of five years and to report whether the owls have returned each year. This helps protect native prairie habitat and also acts as a monitoring program for the owls. Just like the Natural Areas program, we really need to know what is happening out there, but we do not have the personnel to revisit all of the sites each year. Over the last two years we have signed 170 people into the program and that quickly turns into alot of driving. In return for their help, farmers are mailed an annual newsletter, and given an attractive gate sign and program pins.

Another volunteer! Gordon Kitchen with Shannon Lord.

If you spot this owl

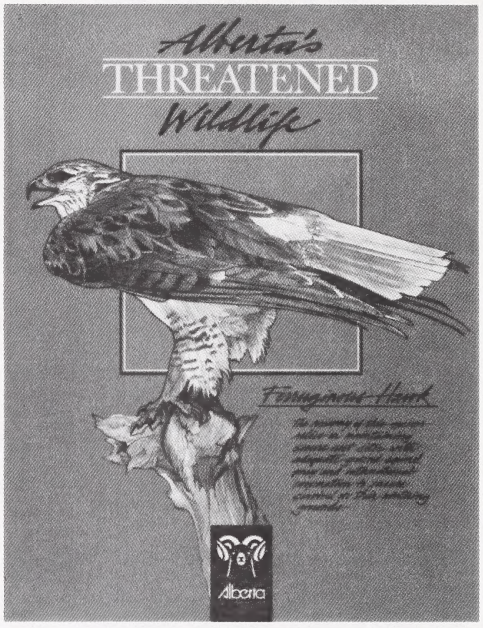
We can always use an extra set of eyes to sight burrowing owls. As there are estimated only to be 900 pairs of burrowing owls in Alberta, every pair sighted is so important. If you do happen to see any along your travels, please report them to your local Fish and Wildlife office or contact me:

Shannon Lord
Brooks Pheasant Hatchery
Box 1829
Brooks, Alberta
T0J 0J0
(403) 362-4122

We are also always looking for ways to spread news of the program. If you know any farmers who may be interested in joining, please contact me with their name or pass my name along to them. Thanks everyone for your help -- it is truly appreciated!❑

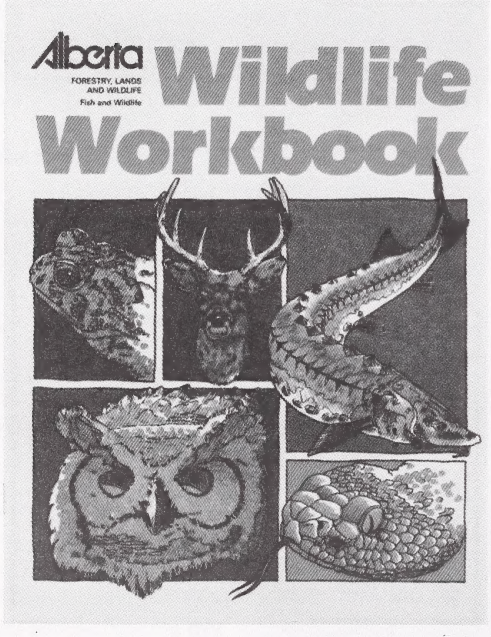
References

Alberta's Threatened Wildlife fact sheets



The Alberta Fish and Wildlife Division, in cooperation with other organizations, has produced a series of brochures on some of Alberta's threatened wildlife. These brochures include information on the biology, status and distribution of the species as well as on their management. Illustrations and photographs are found throughout.

Five fact sheets have been produced to date for the peregrine falcon, burrowing owl, piping plover, swift fox, ferruginous hawk and woodland caribou.❑



Wildlife Workbook

To assist young people to become familiar with wildlife and the terms used in describing habits and habitats associated with fish and animals, the Fish and Wildlife Division has prepared this introductory activity book.

Crosswords, mazes, quizzes and "connect the dots" games are all used to teach an appreciation of Alberta's wildlife. Educators provided guidance throughout development of the publication.❑

Here's where to get your copies . . .

These are just examples of the many reference materials available to you through Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife Information Centres. To obtain your copies of these and many other publications, please drop by or call:

Main floor, Bramalea Building
9920 - 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 2C9
(403) 427-3590

Main floor, Britannia Building
703 - 6 Avenue S.W.
Calgary, Alberta
T2P 0T9
(403) 297-6324

. . . or the Fish and Wildlife office nearest you.❑

Mediation Process a Success!

After several months of careful negotiation coordinated by Alberta Environment, an agreement has been reached that will lessen the impact of road expansion adjacent to North Cooking Lake Natural Area, located 20 km east of Sherwood Park.

This was the first time Alberta Environment had used a formal mediation process to help resolve environmental conflicts.

Concerns raised

Traffic on the Wye Road has dramatically increased in recent years as land has been subdivided into acreages. When the County of Strathcona announced plans a few years ago to expand the road, concerns were raised about the impact on wildlife and habitat of the Natural Area and on the road right-of-way. The expansion required an additional 40 metre right-of-way. Several conservation groups, including the Friends of North Cooking Lake Natural Area and the Cooking Lake Moraine Protection Association, hoped to see the new road remain on the existing alignment. The county administration disagreed because of safety concerns, anticipated cost increases, right-of-way constraints and engineering difficulties.

When the County and conservation groups reached an impasse, Alberta Environment was approached to provide a mediator. **Bill Diepeveen**, Senior Community Affairs Coordinator for the department, held the first meeting on November 23, 1990.

The agreement was signed December 4, 1990, by Strathcona County Councillor Val Kryskow, Glen Lawrence of the Cooking Lake Moraine Protection Association and Graham Griffiths of the Friends of North Cooking Lake Natural Area.

Role of the monitoring committee

A monitoring committee, comprising representatives of the County of Strathcona, the Cooking Lake Moraine Protection Association and Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, was struck. This group will be required to monitor the impact of the road. During construction and after completion, the committee will for example:

- consider authorizing the use of guardrails for both traffic safety and wetland protection along sections of Wye Road;
- ensure there is no disturbance to the beaver colony, or its lodge and dams;
- annually document the status of the watermeal (*Wolffia borealis*), a rare and minute aquatic plant;
- erect appropriate signage advising motorists that they are passing through wildlife habitat and caution is required (costs to be split between the County and Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife); and
- assess the need for fencing along the road (if required, materials to be supplied by Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife and installed by the county).

Changes for County to consider

The County of Strathcona Council will also be requested to: lower the speed limit to 70 km/h along a portion of Wye Road; use its best efforts to gain access to Canadian National Railways and Northwestern Utilities rights-of-way to eliminate standing water between the CNR tracks and the new Wye Road; consider establishing an environmental evaluation process (which may include public hearings and public advisory committees) for all proposed major developments within the county; and consider ecological compensation as a philosophy when dealing with major land disturbances.❑

Details of the agreement

Although very little of the Natural Area was to have been directly affected by the road expansion, the agreement calls for the following extensive mitigation measures:

- the culvert under the new Wye Road will be sized appropriately to prevent flooding;
- fill material will be taken locally (but not from within the Natural Area) to avoid introducing weeds, and fill/dredged materials will not be spilled into the wetlands beyond the right-of-way;
- cleared trees, slash or other debris cannot be left in the right-of-way;
- in order to re-establish native vegetation, a one metre level area will be constructed along the road embankment at water level. The Cooking Lake Moraine Protection Association will be given access to this area to plant cattails (*Typha latifolia*) and basket willows (*Salix petiolaris*) to assist in wildlife re-establishment and survival;
- a silt fence will be installed at the edge of the slope adjacent to the wetlands to prevent sediment erosion and minimize leaching until protective grass growth is sufficient;
- clover (*Trifolium* spp.) will not be included in the embankment cover planting. This will discourage deer, porcupines, snowshoe hares and other wildlife from feeding close to the road, thereby reducing the potential for collisions;
- a fenced and graveled parking area will be constructed by the county at the north end of the Natural Area;
- no fertilizers or herbicides will be used along the wetland areas of adjoining slopes. Mechanical weed control will be done jointly by the Cooking Lake Moraine Protection Association and the county;
- to discourage waterfowl from feeding on new grass shoots, the roadway shoulder will be mowed in late summer or fall; and
- spreading of salt on the portion of the road that borders the Natural Area will be minimal.❑

Return to:

Natural Areas Program
4th flr. 9915 - 108 Street
Edmonton, Alberta
T5K 2C9

Coming Events

Wagner Natural Area
Spring Clean-up
May 4, 1991
Call 458-1794 for more information.

Alberta Wilderness Association (AWA)
Annual Conference
May 10 - 12, 1991
Rafter Six Guest Ranch
"Wilderness: The Geography of Hope" is the theme. For more information, contact the AWA at P.O. Box 6398, Station D, Calgary, Alberta T2P 2E1, or call 283-2025.

Canadian Nature Federation
20th Annual Conference
July 4 - 7, 1991
Red Deer
"Flowing Through Alberta" is the theme. There will be field trips of two to seven days held before and after the conference, day trips, local birding and botany walks, a symposium, environmental theatre, banquet, full-time youth program and qualified babysitting. To learn more, call Jennifer O'Brien at (403) 346-6814, Tuesday through Sunday from 5 - 8 p.m.

Edmonton Plant Study Group
• Identification Workshop: Grasses
May 9, 7:00 p.m.
Leader: Don Bradshaw from Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife. Meet in Room B521 of the Biological Sciences Bldg. at the University of Alberta.

• May Species Count Warm-up
May 21 6:30 p.m.
Elisabeth Beaubien will lead an excursion along Whitemud Creek in search of spring wildflowers. Meet at the Snow Valley parking lot, just south of Whitemud Freeway off 119 Street. On May 25 and 26 there will be a species count. Call Derek Johnson for more information at 436-8231.

For more information call Margaret Flatman (451-0429) or Joyce Gould(449-6619).❑

What are ESAs?

Criteria used to determine what areas constitute ESAs include:
- significant, rare and endangered species;
- habitats with limited representation;
- unusual or high biophysical diversity;
- critical wildlife movement areas;
- important species, landscape, geologic or other natural features; and
- areas having vital environmental, ecological or hydrological functions.

Protecting Alberta's most significant, rare, undisturbed or important natural features is one of the difficult but important tasks of Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife.

The difficulty arises in determining where these features are and setting priorities for their protection. A first step in "screening" the existing information is to conduct Environmentally Significant Area (ESA) inventories.

An ESA inventory focuses on an important ecosystem or ecosystem segment with natural characteristics and processes that should be maintained.

Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife, through the Natural and Protected Areas Program, has coordinated or participated in a large number of ESA inventories. In southern Alberta, most areas have a completed inventory or are currently undergoing study.

The first local/regional jurisdiction to complete an ESA inventory was the Calgary Regional Planning Commission in 1983. Others have followed including the Oldman Regional Planning Commission, Red Deer Regional Planning Commission, County of Strathcona, Edmonton Metropolitan Planning Commission, County of Barrhead, and Southeast Regional Planning Commission. Most of the studies were completed on a cost-shared basis between the local jurisdiction and Alberta Forestry, Lands and Wildlife.

Acquiring and compiling ESA inventory information yields tremendous benefits. It makes it possible to systematically compare sites, and the importance and sensitivity of various sites can be documented in detail. This will help clarify the focus for future research and areas requiring special management attention.

At a reconnaissance level, ESA inventories are Alberta's most strategic, cost-effective and progressive method of quickly gathering information necessary to protect our natural heritage.❑

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FORESTRY, LANDS AND WILDLIFE
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